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ABSTRACT

Throughout most of the 1970s, the two major competing syndicated services measuring consumer magazine audiences utilized different methodologies in gathering magazine audience measurements and released somewhat differing figures. A study was conducted to explore the historical developments of W.R. Simmons and Associates Research, Inc. (Simmons), and Target Group Index (TGI) of the Axiom Market Research Bureau, from 1972 to their consolidation in 1979. Developments in these two services were analyzed using brief textbook synopses and trade press coverage of the events. Advertiser and media planner reactions to these events were also examined. The results indicated that, while the advertising industry was at first wary of TGI in 1972, the inconsistencies between its 1973 data and those of Simmons started an outcry for improved measurement methods that peaked in 1975. Pressure for a basic study of methodologies mounted following the release of Simmons's 1974-75 data, after the company had suspended its fieldwork the previous year due to legal costs. The 1979 merger of the two services was based on financial concerns rather than industry pressure. Differences are still evident between the figures produced by the two services, although the outcry has quieted, presumably because the industry acknowledges that more than one way to measure audiences exists. (HTH)

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THE "MAGAZINE METHODOLOGY MESS" OF THE 1970s

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I. Statement of Purpose

Throughout most of the 1970s, syndicated services measuring consumer magazine audiences created turmoil among those using the generated data; the two major competing services, W. R. Simmons and Associates Research, Inc. (Simmons) and Target Group Index (TGI) of the Axiom Market Research Bureau, Inc. utilized different methodologies in gathering such magazine audience measurements and released somewhat differing figures. The two services consolidated toward the end of the decade in question.

The historical developments of the Simmons and TGI syndicated magazine research services from 1972 through 1979 will be traced in specific detail and the reactions of advertisers and media planners to these developments and differing data figures will be examined herein. The time period selected reflects the span begins with the inception of TGI (1972) and ends just subsequent to the 1978 merger of the two services.

II. Background

For the major part of this century, most advertisers purchased space in magazines based merely upon circulation figures as compiled by the Audit Bureau of Circulation (ABC).[1] Yet advertisers and media planners found such figures as those released by ABC inadequate, since they represented only the primary audience, or persons who subscribed to or bought copies of a particular magazine.[2] A single copy of a magazine may be read by more than one member of a household, it might be passed on to other households, or it might enter a public place and be read by several individuals.[3] Advertisers were interested in the total audience for a particular vehicle, including this secondary or "pass-along" audience,[4] and ABC figures failed to

accurately assess total vehicle readership.

Syndicated services measuring total consumer magazine audiences, and available to any buyer, have existed only for the past two decades; prior to that time, virtually all such print media research was performed for individuals through custom research firms.[5] Since the formation of competing syndicated magazine research services, two distinct methodological approaches have prevailed. The "through-the-book" or "editorial interest" method involves showing a respondent the cover of a test issue of a magazine, taking him through the editorial content, and then asking him to express whether or not he had read or looked into the particular magazine issue.[6] The "recent reading" method, a recall rather than recognition technique, asks respondents to identify whether or not a magazine was read in the past issue-interval by magazine title alone, in order to arrive at estimates of the average audience for the vehicle.[7] The two methodologies have been analyzed and debated at length,[8] yet both have operated historically and continue to operate today in the major competing magazine research services.

W. R. Simmons and Associates Research, Inc., the first syndicated service to measure magazine audiences, was founded in 1962 by Willard R. Simmons and used the "through-the-book" technique to annually produce its report, "Selective Markets and the Media Reaching Them."[9] In 1964, Norton Garfinkle launched Brand Rating Index (BRI) as a direct competitor to Simmons;[10] BRI employed the "recent reading" measurement method.[11]

Most advertising agencies purchased both the BRI and Simmons services, "thus beginning the uniquely American pastime of reconciling magazine audience estimates from syndicated services which used noncomparable methods."[12] Total audience figures released by the two firms, however, were "remarkably

similar," according to Simmons,[13] and Garfinkle agreed that the major differences between the figures from the two services occurred when readers were broken down by specific demographics.[14]

The battle between the two services began to heat up in 1969, when BRI claimed to be "the major agency service."[15] Purportedly due to inaccuracies in sampling in 1968, BRI overrepresented women as 70% rather than 52% of the total United States population; the service attempted to reweight the data but never quite recovered from this error.[16] After an unsuccessful attempt to convert from its recall method to a "through the book" technique, BRI ceased operation in 1970,[17] leaving Simmons as the single major supplier of consumer magazine audience estimates.

In an unprecedented move in 1972, the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency imported Target Group Index from England to fill the void left by the departure of BRI.[18] For the first time in audience measurement history in the United States, an agency was proposing to gather, process, publish, and syndicate media and market data.[19] TGI was set to utilize the "recent reading" methodology, in contrast to the Simmons through-the-book approach.[20] Thus, the scene was set for the TGI-Simmons feud, which was to cloud syndicated magazine audience research for most of the remainder of the decade.

III. Research Questions

Derived from this background scenario and the aforementioned statement of purpose, the following research questions regarding advertising industry reaction to the chain of events in the 1970s were addressed:

1. How did advertisers and media planners react to conflicting magazine audience measurement data released by the Simmons and

TGI syndicated services in 1973?

2. How did advertisers and media planners react to the discrepant Simmons magazine audience data released in 1974 and the resulting legal action?
3. Did advertisers and media planners subsequently pressure the syndicated services for uniformity of magazine audience data?
4. Did the reactions of advertisers and media planners contribute to the decision to merge Simmons and TGI in 1978?

IV. Justification for Research

The topic of syndicated magazine audience research services in the 1970s, including the differing methodologies and perceived data discrepancies, lacks extensive previous consideration. Furthermore, comprehensive reactions to the events on the part of advertisers and media planners have not been documented. Therefore, the present research sought to fill the gap existent in literature concerning these issues.

As media costs presently escalate, advertising agencies are becoming increasingly dependent upon syndicated services to supply media research.[21] In light of the presence of two major competing syndicated services measuring magazine audiences today, with each utilizing a unique methodological approach, examination of the developments and subsequent advertising industry reactions to the similar situation occurring one decade ago is warranted. At present, Simmons Market Research Bureau, Inc. (SMRB) measures magazine audiences using an "issue-specific, through-the-book method" to identify the average audience per issue for 110 magazines,[22] while Mediamark Research Inc. (MRI) utilizes a "perfected recent-reading methodology" to measure the total audience of over 200 publications.[23] Such an investigation as that undertaken

may reveal implications regarding the present trend in syndicated magazine research services which appears to be mimicking that prevailing in the 1970s.

V. Literature Review

Past research regarding the developments in syndicated services measuring magazine audiences in the 1970s is sparse. Methodological differences between Simmons and TGI and possible causes for audience data discrepancies based upon such differing methodologies were discussed in one scholarly consideration that recommended the audience figures be regarded only as "estimates."[24] Another author discussed the utility, or lack thereof, of the audience figures released by syndicated services; magazine audience data was regarded to hold little merit as it offered "an inaccurate measure of a meaningless variable, performed with considerable frequency and at a vast expense."[25] Possible reasons for fluctuations in readers-per-copy magazine figures were addressed in a third scholarly work that cited circulation supply and reader demand as potential causes for such changes.[26]

However, these works were all published between 1974 and 1976. Historical analyses of the decade are absent. Furthermore, examination of reactions of advertisers and media planners, direct users of audience data, has not been undertaken at length. The viewpoint of advertising agencies toward syndicated research services was researched through a 1977 questionnaire seeking opinions of these institutions; the study dealt with both broadcast and print services, and both Simmons and TGI were included in the questionnaire.[27] Results revealed that agencies desired additional syndicated services.[28] While this research dealt more specifically with advertising industry attitudes toward the services in question, these

attitudes were collected at one point in time, in 1977, and were not reflective of the changing developments throughout the 1970s.

VI. Historical Method

The developments in syndicated services measuring consumer magazine audiences from 1972 through 1979, including methodologies utilized, data released, and the merger decision, were analyzed through the use of brief textbook synopses and trade press coverage of the events. Speeches given and audits performed during the time period in question and brief telephone interviews with some of the major participants in the occurrences were also used. This historical analysis of secondary and primary sources provided a detailed, chronological description of the events occurring in the field of print media research throughout the 1972 to 1979 time period.

Advertiser and media planner reactions to the events occurring in syndicated magazine research were examined through secondary trade press coverage of industry opinions, using Advertising Age and what was then Media Decisions in particular; transcribed interviews and discussions among major parties involved were included. Articles penned by agency media planners during the time period under investigation and brief telephone interviews with major participants in the events were also utilized. Through this analysis of primarily secondary and primary trade press coverage of the time period, advertising industry reaction to the occurrences in syndicated magazine research services throughout the 1970s was gleaned.

VII. Situation Description

The two major competing syndicated services measuring consumer magazine audiences during the 1970s were Simmons and TGI. Simmons utilized a through-the-book method with stripped-down versions of magazines throughout the time period in question,[29] while TGI employed the recent reading method.[30]

TGI, under the direction of Dr. Timothy Joyce, former director of media and marketing research at J. Walter Thompson,[31] released its first magazine audience figures early in 1973.[32] Later that year, when magazine audience data was available from both Simmons and TGI, the figures from the two services differed both in estimated total audience for various magazines and in numbers of men and women in the audiences.[33] A comparison of the figures for the 62 consumer magazines covered in both studies revealed that TGI estimates were higher than those of Simmons in 42 instances, and Simmons figures topped those of TGI in 19 cases.[34] Joyce maintained that the TGI numbers were "more accurate,"[35] while Simmons held that his audience figures were measured correctly.[36] Discrepancies between the services were further debated at the 1973 Advertising Research Foundation (ARF) conference, where Simmons, Joyce, and Paul Gerhold, ARF president, spoke about the issue.[37] Simmons and Joyce each effectively defended his methodological approach through denouncing that of his competitor, while Gerhold indicated that the two services did not appear to be measuring the same variable due to the data discrepancies revealed in the 1973 audience figures.[38]

In August of 1973, Simmons suddenly announced that he was postponing the 1974 Simmons study, after 11 consecutive years of publication, citing field recovery or cooperation rate declines as his rationale.[39] Simmons stated that completion rates would fall below 77% and that the increase in numbers of individuals unwilling to cooperate in research was indicative in part of the hesitance of people to allow interviewers into their homes due to a rising fear of crime.[40] Simmons was replaced by Frank Stanton as of W. R. Simmons and Associates shortly thereafter;[41] an ARF audit of 1973 Simmons and TGI methods had uncovered problems with each service, but more

severe problems with Simmons.[42]

When the Simmons data for 1974-75 was finally released, it contained "some surprises" in comparison to the last available Simmons figures.[43] "Violent differences" in total audience figures, as compared to previous Simmons reports, appeared.[44] Particularly alarming was that Newsweek had nearly closed the readership gap between itself and Time, according to the new audience figures,[45] although Time had a circulation figure 50% higher than that of Newsweek.[46] Time had apparently suffered a 13% total audience loss, while Newsweek had gained 26 percent.[47] Since the first study by TGI in late 1972, it had claimed that Time and Newsweek audience figures were comparable; thus, the latest Simmons report tended to corroborate TGI newsweekly rankings.[48] The new Simmons management indicated that sampling and procedural revisions may account for the differences,[49] and Simmons himself cited sampling and interviewing differences as possible explanations,[50] yet such reasons were merely speculative. Furthermore, discrepancies remained between the 1974-75 TGI and Simmons figures.[51]

On January 15, 1975, Time, Inc. filed suit against Simmons for breach of contract in its 1974-75 readership study, claiming unreliable data were released;[52] Time, Inc. asked the court to void the present overdue Simmons bill or award Time, Inc. a reimbursement for all previous years in which it had subscribed to Simmons.[53] Simmons denied the charges[54] and subsequently countersued Time, Inc. for libel and conspiracy,[55] demanding in excess of $10 million.[56] Esquire also filed suit against Simmons for what it called "intentional" exclusion of the magazine from Simmons fieldwork.[57]

Simmons again decided to suspend fieldwork on its 1975-76 study, due to

the prospect of paying exorbitant legal fees, according to Stanton,[58] but then conducted a limited study.[59] For reasons not publicly disclosed,[60] the Time,Inc.-Simmons legal battle was settled out-of-court in early June of 1975, with Time, Inc. agreeing to pay its overdue bill,[61] and the Esquire suit was dismissed shortly thereafter.[62]

An ARF "total audit" of the 1974-75 Simmons data had revealed no evidence of distortion in the study.[63] The complete ARF audit included reports on sample design and selection, sample completion rates, field interviewing and verification, and sample weighting and audience estimation;[64] "no consistent serious failures to conform to recognized probability sampling procedures" were found and completion rates, interviewing and estimation were similarly reported as valid.[65]

Late in 1975, the ARF revealed plans to research several variables involved in syndicated services methodological techniques,[66] as well as a proposal for a continuous auditing plan.[67] Due to a lack of funding, ARF was forced to halt its plans,[68] yet a revamped research unit, the Magazine Research Development Committee, did begin investigations late in 1976.[69]

Simmons and TGI audience measurement figures continued to differ, however, in 1976,[70] purportedly due to different assessments of the total population,[71] and again in 1977, wherein Simmons revealed several declines.[72] TGI figures showed 87% of the magazines with audience gains to Simmons' 30%.[73] Both Stanton and Joyce continued to insist that each one's measurement technique was the more accurate for portraying readership estimates.[74] Thus, the battle between the two services continued until July of 1978, when TGI and Simmons merged to form Simmons Market Research Bureau.[75]

VIII. Findings

Because advertisers and agency media planners utilize syndicated media research data in attampting to most efficiently place advertising, such events as those previously described would have undoubtedly stimulated reaction from these individuals.

Upon the introduction of TGI in 1972, several advertising agencies were hesitant to subscribe to the service, according to then TGI president Timothy Joyce.[76] The initial reaction among the top twenty agencies was described as one of "puzzlement and resistance."[77] Leo Burnett was one early agency supporter of the new service;[78] Dr. Seymour Banks of Burnett espoused the not-popularly-held view that "nobody should close his eyes and mind to something that's being added to our information resources just because it's an adjunct of a competitive agency."[79]

Upon the release of the first TGI audience figures in 1973, however, agencies were described as "aghast at wide differences in total audience numbers" between the two services.[80] Credibility of both services was reported to be straining, and questions of validity arose.[81] The introduction of a radically different set of numbers was reported as being highly upsetting to the agency community; "if it [the industry] is forced to admit TGI is right, it will have to admit that it has been wrong for a decade—since it's been using Simmons as a basis for decision-making."[82] Banks stated that "'we can't afford to get excited by one set of numbers.'"[83] Jack Hill of Ogilvy and Mather agreed with the wait-and-see attitude taken by most agencies, stressing that "'maybe, on the basis of their 1973 reports, neither TGI nor Simmons is right.'"[84] Barbara Alpert

of Norman, Craig, and Kummel pointed out that the problem was the discrepant data of the two services, unlike the similar figures that Simmons and BRI had previously provided.[85]

The reaction of media research directors and major agencies to the suspension of the Simmons fieldwork in 1974 was patient and quiet,[86] and most industry sources reportedly did not forecast that the credibility of future magazine research would be tainted by the suspension.[87] Before deciding about alternate research services,[88] most agency executives interviewed planned to wait until talking with the Simmons representatives.[89]

Yet, in mid-1974, a panel of eight individuals from various facets of the industry was put together by Media Decisions to discuss what was labelled as "the credibility gap" in syndicated media audience research; the panel included three agency representatives, one media representative, one advertiser representative, and three syndicated service representatives, including Joyce.[89] While he stressed that "worry" might be a better term to describe the industry feelings than "credibility gap," Ron Kaatz, media research director at J. Walter Thompson, stated that beliefs were being shaken.[90] Conclusions from the discussion revealed that a credibility gap in syndicated media audience research existed, due partly to lack of funds to research the services and a scarcity of methodological research. The panel also concluded that more and different surveys should be devised, research methods should be fully disclosed, and more tripartite (advertiser, agency, media) participation should be practiced.[91]

John Meskil, senior vice-president and media director at Warwick, Welsh and Miller, Inc., wrote in 1974 of the problem of research for magazines,

declaring that the forthcoming Simmons study would either help or further muddle the picture.[92] Meskil called for action on the part of media researchers regarding the problems in audience research, labelling such action "long overdue."[93] While agreeing that the syndicated services displayed measurement problems, Bernard Guggenheim, vice-president of media support operations at Campbell-Ewald, wrote in defense of the services, claiming that their positive benefits were rarely stressed.[94]

The controversial 1974-75 Simmons data was presented in what was labelled as an atmosphere of "growing advertising industry controversy surrounding variations between Simmons and other syndicated studies, as well as escalating demands for more proven validity in magazine audience research,"[95] and the release of the Simmons figures was reported to result in advertising industry discontent reaching a new, "more strident" pitch, since the data compounded existent serious doubts regarding the reliability of syndicated audience figures.[96] A "sense of bewilderment, skepticism, and some cynicism" was reported to have settled over agency media researchers.[97] As Time declared its search for alternative research forms, the situation was dubbed "the worse crisis print research has faced in recent decades;"[98] "significantly large" numbers of agency, publisher, and even research company executives were reported to privately suspect fraud or incompetence at some point in the recent history of syndicated magazine studies.[99]

Pressure for a basic study of methodologies mounted following the 1974-75 Simmons data release, on the part of agencies, advertisers, and media. Such pressure was cited as part of the reason behind the ARF attempt to develop its committee for methodological research.[100] Advertising industry skepticism was increasingly reflected throughout 1975, as trade press coverage

of the issues proliferated.

Agencies were reportedly "dumbfounded" at the original announcement by Simmons that it would suspend 1975-76 fieldwork due to legal costs.[101] Yet, while agency people desired to see their faith in Simmons confirmed, due to their past use of the data in media decisions and recommendations,[102] a "counter-current" flowed largely from advertisers who despaired over the differing audience figures.[103] The Brown and Williamson Tobacco Company (B&W) was perhaps the most vocal of advertisers concerning the issues; Hugh Brooks, B&W advertising services manager, revealed that he felt the present Simmons and TGI type of audience counts were "unacceptable."[104] B&W brand and advertising representatives were unanimous in their opinions that the recent data variations were both unbelievable and unacceptable and called for increased advertiser involvement and control in magazine audience research.[105] Walter Staab, president of SFM Media Corporation, also suggested that advertisers play a part in developing valid audience data methods.[106] Gene Richmond, director of advertising at American Motors, agreed about the need for improvement in magazine audience research but called for a tripartite type of organization.[107]

In late May 1975, Advertising Age convened a panel of agency and advertiser executives regularly involved in media selection and analysis.[108] Jack Cline, advertising manager of American Telephone and Telegraph, revealed that he thought more advertisers would begin demonstrating concern regarding the magazine audience issues.[109] Hank Jendras, marketing research manager for Nestle, agreed that the duty rested with advertisers and that they were showing greater interest through the ARF and its research policy committee.[110]

Trade press coverage of advertising industry reactions to the questionable validity of syndicated magazine research services ebbed in 1976, although Gabe Samuels, manager of media analysis at J. Walter Thompson, discounted the word "data" about media audiences, replacing it with "evidence" as a better descriptor of the indicative estimates supplied.[111] The release of the 1976 TGI and Simmons figures did not generate substantial outcry, as evidenced by the lack of press coverage; Hill of Ogilvy and Mather claimed that "'it's no surprise that there are a few surprises'" in the two sets of figures.[112]

In 1977, however, the validity of data from syndicated services was still reported to be an "overriding concern" among agency media analysts;[113] Banks of Brunett labelled it "the biggest concern."[114] While Guggenheim suggested that perhaps qualitative research should be performed at the advertiser and agency levels to compare audience figures,[115] Ogilvy and Mather chose to update the 1976-77 Simmons data rather than use the newly-released figures due to irregularities in the numbers.[116] Once again, advertisers were faced with the question of "whom to believe."[117] Meskil lamented that "just when the syndicated services were beginning to regain some of the acceptance they had lost at the time of the Simmons/Time, Inc. lawsuit, these new reports are bound to cause confusion among advertisers and agencies.[118]

A tendency among agencies to downplay the importance of print media audience numbers in buying and planning was reported in 1978, since confidence in Simmons and TGI had been "shattered," according to Bill Claggett, vice-president of advertising and marketing for Ralston-Purina.[119] The belief that syndicated research was "oversold, overused, and over-rated" began

gaining acceptance.[120] At least three major agencies chose to ignore the 1977-78 data, several elected to use the 1976-77 data, and virtually every agency was forced to adjust audience figures for several magazines, according to Art Edelstein, vice-president and associate media director for Post-Keyes-Gardner,[121] as many executives were becoming wary of the data used to make major decisions.[122] While Valentine Appel, formerly with Simmons and now SMRB executive vice-president, referred to the discrepancies existent as "very small," he emphasized that "there is no such thing as a small number in this business," and that the large differences occurred in absolute terms.[123]

In July of 1978, the decision to merge Simmons and TGI came as a surprise even to those employed by TGI;[124] Joyce, who had earlier returned to England, was also stunned.[125] J. Walter Thompson chairman Don Johnston said that the merger evolved because the market for syndicated research was inadequate to support both services and improve methodology.[126] When launched in 1972, TGI had operated in debt.[127] In 1975, reports had intimated that TGI was battling unprofitability,[128] but had hoped to display its first profits shortly.[129] TGI reportedly lost $600,000 in 1977;[130] Joyce admitted that the firm had never been profitable and that the service which performed its fieldwork had gone bankrupt.[131] Appel indicated that the merger decision was "strictly a matter of dollars and cents."[132]

Agency and advertiser experts reportedly remained unreassured in the wake of the merger announcement, due to the fact that a "combined methodology" was to be utilized by the new SMRB;[133] comparability of the two methods was questioned,[134] and the American Association of Advertising Agencies' Media Research Committee, chaired by Guggenheim, urged the use of only one method.[135]

An AkF audit of the new SMRB methodology revealed that the study was performed "conscientiously," but that the methods were not comparable; ARF could find no way to callibrate the results.[136]

In 1979, Joyce re-entered the syndicated magazine research service field with Magazine Research Inc.[137] (later Mediamark Research Inc.), and the "magazine research war" once again began to heat up,[138] as it had in previous years. "It happens every fall. As regularly as the turning of the leaves and the unfolding of the World Series, the magazine industry becomes embroiled in a controversy over audience figures."[139]

IX. Conclusions

While the advertising industry was at first somewhat wary of TGI, the inconsistencies between its data and that of Simmons began an outcry for improved measurement methods that gathered steam throughout the decade, peaking late in 1975. The decision to merge the two firms, however, appears to have been purely financial in nature. Thus, while the outcry of advertisers and media planners was not ignored, as evidenced by increased ARF plans for research validity studies, the merger decision was apparently independent of the industry reaction.

Differences are still displayed between the audience figures produced by the two operating services, although trade press coverage of the issues is less frequent and less dense than that of the 1970s. Joyce feels that outcry has quieted because the industry accepts that more than one way to measure audiences exists.[140] Guggenheim contends that the concern is still existent but not as publicized.[141]

Presently, agencies subscribe to both services, yet many have shifted

to a large number of qualitative factors in evaluating media due to the still evolving distrust and apathy toward the syndicated figures.[142] Although Guggenheim agrees that credibility has eroded and concurs that agencies often devise and utilize weighting systems for the audience figures, he reveals that the ARF Magazine Research Council Validity Committee, which he chairs, is developing a standard against which Simmons and MRI could be compared.[143] Such a standard may at last provide a settlement to the long-standing magazine research controversy and perhaps restore credibility to syndicated media research.

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[39]"Simmons Defends His Hiatus," Media Decisions (September, 1973), p. 57.

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